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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000759

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [PHUM](#) [AJ](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: PRIVATE IRAN COMMENTS OF SISTANI, MALIKI, AND ALI  
KHOMEINI

Classified By: POLECON COUNSELOR ROB GARVERICK, REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D)

#### Summary

¶1. (S) A prominent Sh'ia cleric just returned from Iraq and Iran shared some of the Iran-related content of his recent meetings with Ayatollah Sistani, Prime Minister Maliki, and Ali Khomeini (a grandson of Ayatollah Khomeini). The cleric related that Maliki regards recent factional in-fighting in Iran as helpfully distracting Iran from meddling in Iraq; that Ayatollah Sistani is getting pressure from all sides in Iran to take some action, and is inclined to do nothing; that Supreme Leader Khomeini's rumored cancer is likely either non-existent or in remission; that Mehdi Rafsanjani has been in the U.K. for about a month, after illegally leaving Iran; and that (despite rumors), as of September 17, no meeting between Rafsanjani, Hassan Khomeini, and Supreme Leader Khomeini had taken place.

¶2. (S) The cleric noted that Tehran and Qom are filled with green-colored items and clothing, and that calls for Khomeini's fall are being made in public conversations; however, Quds Day turnouts in Qom were modest. He said that the opposition was re-galvanized by Qods day protests (which he witnessed), and predicted further protests and unrest associated with the opening of the school year and other occasions for mass gatherings, such as sporting events. End Summary.

#### Call from Sh'ia Cleric

¶3. (S) In response to Eid greetings, Baku Iran watcher was contacted from London on Tuesday, September 22 by Hojastelislam Jawad al-Khoei (strictly protect), an Iraqi national, who has spent eleven of the last fourteen years in Qom. Al-Khoei has been a friend and contact of Iran watcher since 2006, when Iraq/Iran political insights and reporting based on his information was highly praised by Washington agencies.

¶4. (S) The nephew of two famous Ayatollahs and the grandson of a third, al-Khoei has operated from London since late 2007, from whence he helps operate the international al-Khoei Foundation, founded by his uncle Sayeed Abdul Majid al-Khoei, who was brutally murdered in Najaf by al-Sadr followers in ¶2003. He travels frequently to Iran and Iraq, where he has direct access to many senior clerics and political figures, including Ayatollah Sistani in Najaf, Prime Minister Maliki

in Baghdad, and Ayatollah Khomeini's grandsons Hassan and Ali in Iran. He has also met in Amman with King Abdullah of Jordan.

#### Meetings with Maliki and Sistani

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15. (S) Al-Khoei related that he had just returned from a ten day visit to Tehran and Qom on September 21, preceded by a three week visit to Iraq. He reported that while in Iraq he met privately with Prime Minister Maliki, and once (on or about September 11) with Grand Ayatollah Sistani. He said that he also met privately for three hours with ISCI head Ammar al-Hakim, but did not talk to him about Iran issues. In Iran he met with the Khomeini brothers, as well as Sayeed Sharistani Sistani's personal representative in Iran), and many other prominent figures. (Note: Sistani was a student of al-Khoei's grandfather, Grand Ayatollah Abu al-Qasem al-Khoei, and has known Jawad al-Khoei all his life. End note.)

#### Iranian Protests: Good for Iraq?

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16. (S) According to al-Khoei, Maliki agreed that post-election instability in Iran is "good for Iraq," as it partially distracts the Iranian leadership from meddling in Iraq. Al-Khoei said that Maliki claimed that he is under a lot of pressure to either "go with Iran or the U.S.A."; al-Khoei claimed that he interjected "go with the U.S.A.," and Maliki laughingly promised to "follow your advice."

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Al-Khoei asserted that Maliki said that he "understands that the (true) goals of Iran are not good for Iraq."

#### Maliki: Syria Behind Bombings

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17. (S) Al-Khoei added that Maliki sees the hand of Syria behind much of the recent suicide bombing campaign, claiming that Syria's goal is to destabilize Iraq, and/or force Baghdad to include a pro-Syrian faction of Iraqi Baathists in the government, presumably as a first step toward a takeover by this group.

#### Sistani: Sad About Iran, Will Do Nothing for Now

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18. (S) Al-Khoei said that he and Sistani spoke mainly about Iraq, but spent "five or six minutes" on Iran as well. He claimed that Sistani called the situation in Iran "very sad," and claimed that he has received letters from all the leading parties in the factional conflict "asking me to say what they like." According to al-Khoei, Sistani said that he is inclined to remain silent on the issue, as a means of preserving good ties with all sides, and because of potentially negative repercussions in Iraq should he become overtly involved in Iranian issues (Note: al-Khoei did not elaborate on this latter point. End Note).

#### Iran: "Green is Everywhere"

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19. (S) Commenting on Iran (from which he returned on September 20), al-Khoei related that "green colors are everywhere," including on T-shirts and other clothing. He said that the majority of the population was critical of the Iranian regime before the election, but did not focus on Ayatollah Khomeini when voicing this criticism; this situation, he claimed, has totally changed. According to al-Khoei, he heard people in the streets calling for the fall of Khomeini not merely as protest chants, but as part of public conversations. He stressed that this is the first time in fifteen years (since he first came to Iran) that such harsh attacks on the Supreme Leader have been made in public.

¶10. (S) Al-Khoei was in Qom for several days (including Quds Day), and said he was taken aback by anti-system comments of some (unnamed) clerics there whom he described as among the earliest supporters of the Islamic Revolution. He said that he has never seen such strong "Saddam-like" security in Qom in the fifteen years he has been living/traveling there, including comprehensive phone monitoring and following around of clerics. He described the public Quds Day demonstrations in Qom as extremely modest.

¶11. (C) Al-Khoei said that he witnessed the September 18 broadcast of a Tehran football match, which was shown partly in black and white, with no crowd shots, and without crowd sounds, presumably to avoid broadcasting the reported sea of green colors and opposition chanting which took place there. He opined that dealing with the risk of such demonstrations at any such future mass gatherings, and the approaching opening of the school year, are among the many "headaches" currently facing the Ahmedinejad government.

Ali Khomeini Denies Meeting with Khomeini  
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¶12. (S) Al-Khoei said that he met with Ayatollah Khomeini's grandson Ali in Tehran on September 16, and was told that, despite rumors, as of that time there had been no "private meeting" between Hassan Khomeini, Ayatollah Rafsanjani, and Supreme Leader Khomeini. (Note: other sources have told Iran watcher that such a meeting took place some time during the days prior to Khomeini's Eid sermon on September 20. See septel. End Note). He said that he also asked Ali about rumors that Ayatollah Khomeini is suffering from cancer. Ali (and other individuals to whom he asked the same question) downplayed these reports, which al-Khoei said began about a year ago. According to al-Khoei, Ali said that Khomeini exercises every day, does not smoke, and appears to be in

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relatively good health. Al-Khoei added that while no one is sure about the true state of Khomeini's health, if he has cancer it appears to be in remission.

Mehdi Rafsanjani in U.K.  
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¶13. (S) After checking with a London friend and business associate of Rafsanjani's, Al-Khoei confirmed rumors that Ayatollah Rafsanjani's son Mehdi has been in the U.K. for approximately a month. According to al-Khoei, Mehdi is keeping a low profile, having left Iran "illegally" (i.e., despite a legal ban on his exit).

Going to the U.S.A.  
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¶14. (C) Al-Khoei indicated that he has more to say/share on his various meetings, current clerical politics, and Iraq and Iran issues generally, but was reluctant to go into additional details over the telephone. He has a visa, and will be in the USA from October 3-10, and in Washington from October 6-10. He is going to the U.S. (his first visit) to participate in an interfaith conference at Georgetown University, and visit some al-Khoei Foundation projects. He added that he plans to revisit Iraq and Iran shortly after this visit, and will eventually relocate permanently to Najaf.

¶15. (S) Al-Khoei told Iran watcher that he is willing to meet with State Department Iran and/or Iraq policy officers in Washington at a mutually convenient time. He also promised to be available to London-based Iran watcher, should she wish to meet him. If desired, Baku Iran watcher can help facilitate these meetings, and/or provide Washington officers with direct contact information for al-Khoei.

Comment

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¶16. (S) Al-Khoei comes from what amounts to high nobility among Sh'ia clerics, almost royalty. He speaks fairly good English, and regards himself as a strong Iraqi nationalist as well as a religious thinker. Though his main interest is Iraq, he offers many insights on Iranian clerical figures and politics as well. Though not entirely objective (he despises al-Sadr, and appears to have some behind the scenes political ambitions), he is very intelligent, frank and straightforward. His offer to talk to Iran/Iraq policy officers in Washington should be seriously considered. End Comment.

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